

An interview with A. E. Stallings (Athens, Greece, March 2017)



The multi-award winning poet and translator Alicia Stallings studied Classics at the University of Georgia and Oxford. She has published three collections of poetry, *Archaic Smile*, *Hapax*, and *Olives*, and a verse translation of Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*. Her forthcoming works include a new book of poems, *Like*, and a translation of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. She has received a translation grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and fellowships from United States Artists, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation. She is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Alicia now lives in Athens, where *Omnibus* interviewer, Ben Folit-Weinberg, asked her to tell us a bit more about her studies, poetry, and translations.

What made you study Classics?

My father always wanted me to take Latin in high school, so of course I didn't. I started out as a Music and English major [studying in pursuit of two B.A.s: one in Music, and one in English Literature]. At the time, though, English was very theory-based, and was less about the actual literature. I was attracted to Classics because of the close engagement with the poems, the language, the texts. While I was studying English literature, I also came to feel that to be a writer and poet one needed to have at least some Latin, that Classics and poetry were often intertwined, that Classics was good training for a poet.

That's an interesting answer to the question: 'And what are you going to do with that?'

Most of the important things in life are not useful. I briefly taught high school Latin in the US, and when kids would ask me that, I'd turn around and say: 'And what is the use of football?' The other thing I'll say is that, generally, whatever people tell you to go into when you are 16 or 17 – because that's the next big career – is not going to be the next big career. Whereas if you study what you love, that will provide nourishment through your whole life, and if you keep following things that interest you, one way or another you will have an interesting career.

Do you ever find yourself using aspects of Classics on a daily basis in your work?

Yes, in fact I was translating *Works and Days* during the nadir of the economic crisis, and I live in Greece. Suddenly, then, this Archaic Greek didactic poet, who I had assumed had not too much to do with anything in the real world, much less my own life, seemed extremely topical and current. He talks about debt, and justice, and corruption, and the courts, and how to make a living in the world. Some of the words are even still the same: if you are looking in a Greek newspaper today, 'debt' is still 'chreos'. (*Works and Days* could even be the name of a newspaper, couldn't it?) And in daily interactions you have this Hesiodic conversation more or less constantly: what Greek is not in a lawsuit with his brother over a piece of property? And the complaint is always that the judges involved are corrupt. That is partly because it isn't really about how to build a plough, or what have you. But it's about justice, and how to live in right relation with your neighbors and the earth. And the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, and Hesiod is always on top of that one: we are living in an iron age, things are always looking worse. That never changes.

Your training as a Classicist has also played an important role in your work as a translator. Can you tell us about that?

It's great to have a translation to work on if you are a writer, because you never have to face the blank page. Sometimes you don't even have to worry about what you're going to say, just about how you're going to say it... I think it is Rexroth who says that 'translation saves you from your contemporaries'. This is really important for a writer, not to be beholden to the last 50 years but to have a broader sweep. And translation also lets you try on other voices, other genres, other genders, other nationalities, other ethnicities, so I think it's a really deeply humane occupation.

Do you think that the voices of the poets you translate seep into your own writing at all?

I think it may have been Auden who said something to the effect that 'the problem is not finding your voice – the problem is once you've found your voice, how to get rid of it' ... I'm not sure how much of an influence it has on voice – one would hope it would influence one's voice, though unfortunately one's own individual voice is not really something you can escape. What does happen is you learn more about other genres. Translation is a form of deep reading. Cervantes has a really great line about translation, that it's the other side of the tapestry: you can see the pattern, but you don't have all the texture. I think translating long poems has helped me to write long poems, since you get to understand how they work, how they are structured – and in a way that is very different from just reading a long poem. Having to take it apart and put it back together gives you an insight into the nuts and bolts of the poem.

Ben Folit-Weinberg recently completed a PhD at the University of Cambridge; he is currently living in Athens.

‘For Atalanta’ by A. E. Stallings

*Your name is long and difficult, I know.
So many people whom we didn't ask
Have told us so
And taken us to task.
You, too, perhaps will wonder as you grow
And blame us with the venom of thirteen
For ruining your life,
Using our own love against us, keen
As a double-bladed knife.
Already I can picture the whole scene.
How will we answer you?
Yes, you were in a hurry to arrive
As if it were a race to be alive.
We weighed the syllables, and they rang true,
And we were hoping too*

*You'd come to like the stories
Of princesses who weren't set on shelves
Like china figurines. Not allegories,
But girls whose glories
Included rescuing themselves,
Slaying their own monsters, running free
But not running away. It might be rough
Singled out for singularity. Tough.
Beauty will be some help. You'll see.
But it is not enough
To be nimble, brave, or fleet.
O apple of my eye, the world will drop
Many gilded baubles at your feet
To break your stride: don't look down, don't stoop
To scoop them up, don't stop*

‘For Atalanta’ was written for the christening of Alicia Stallings’s daughter, Atalanta. It first appeared in *Five Points: A Journal of Literature and Art* published by Georgia State University. It is reproduced here with permission of the author.